Family History Workshop – A Guide

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A Conceptual Overview

In my experience – both in academia and working as an historian among the public at large – the word *research* all too often conjures up feelings of being overwhelmed. This may come from a number of reasons – but most importantly, it may be the consequence of simply not knowing where to start and what precisely one is trying to accomplish.

Therefore, it may help to think of research as simply an organized way to satisfy a deep curiosity one has about the family being explored. It typically starts with someone's thirst for knowledge about their own roots. Once initiated, that thirst commonly blossoms into a powerful urge to reconstruct one's family history.

The advantages of writing a family history benefit the author who accepts the challenge of *research*. It is inevitable that such work will lead to a revised self-image. In addition, learning about one's family history yields a deeper understanding of the historical moment that family came of age in. By definition, this work adds to the enormous historical literature which still tends to ignore the lives of people who are not famous – but are just as important – in some ways even more important – to the functioning of the society they live in. In other words, family histories give us a fuller picture of what the American past looks like. By extension, it also gives us deeper insights into the worlds many American families came from before ever setting foot in America – or New York.

In another sense this kind of research is valuable in that what is discovered and written about becomes part of the written record of the family concerned. What is a valuable historical document is also something that becomes a family heirloom. To say that it will be cherished is to risk an understatement.

For the person compiling the family history there is also the intellectual excitement of the historical reconstruction. There is deep satisfaction in actually engaging with the past. Compiling information, analyzing that information, putting everything together in a coherent whole is a process that one can take

great pride in. But of course, curiosity and excitement is not enough to see a project through to successful completion. Successful completion requires the willingness to roll up one's sleeves and dig in. That of course means working to gather the materials that will make the writing of one's family history possible.

The Gathering of Historical Facts

The gathering of pertinent historical facts about one's family is an act of great creativity. One has to be imaginative when thinking about possible historical avenues to pursue. The most obvious place to start is with the actual records of the family. What are these records? They can be scrapbooks, or diaries. College or high school yearbooks are potentially useful. The possibilities here seem endless. There are boxes of newspaper clippings hiding in someone's closet. There may be baby books, photo albums, health records, or letters. A family Bible may contain some genealogical data. An interesting question regarding these materials takes us to the act of interpretation. If a family member was saving something, then it was most likely considered to be important. Why?

Another potential source of historical facts is of course vital records. These include such documents as marriage, death, and birth certificates. Here what can be called legal documents may come into play. Contracts, tax records, divorce decrees, property titles, and deeds of trust all provide information helpful in reconstructing a person's family history. Church records are of potential use. These include a variety of materials, ranging from baptismal certificates through parish histories and the minutes of church meetings.

A source often overlooked is the city directory. In many American cities these began to be published after the end of the Civil War. These can be a rich source of information, telling the researcher about home addresses and even the occupations of the family's head of household.

Speaking of city directories reminds us that census records – be they state or federal – can also be of potential use. Since 1790, the federal government has taken a population census every ten years. It should be remembered that records through 1900 that have survived do not include the 1890 returns, which unfortunately were destroyed by a fire in 1921. Different clusters of years reveal different population characteristics. For example, the census returns for the years

1790 through 1840 only show the names of heads of households. Those who were not heads of households were only recorded by gender and age. As we get closer to our own day the federal census returns reveal an enlargement of the categories of information. To add to the possibilities, state returns often provide more detailed information on categories ignored in the federal census, such as the level of education of family members.

Another rich vein of historical information can be military records. The National Archives holds many service records. Closer to home, there is an extensive collection of military records regarding Genesee County veterans in the History Department Library and Archives. Along with military records there are the archival records pertaining to selective service records. This is especially so with regard to the First World War. During that conflict, all males residing in the United States between the ages of eighteen and forty-five were mandated by law to register for the draft. These records reveal a host of characteristics, such as occupation, employer, nearest relative, and other such information.

But historical information is not limited to the written word. There is also what historians refer to as *material culture*. This category of historical information includes a wide variety of materials – such as military uniforms, baseball gloves, dishes, trophies, jewelry, and seemingly countless other kinds of objects. Such materials can reveal much about the family as a whole and the individuals within it. Speaking of objects suggests something else – sometimes so obvious that it is ignored. Cemetery headstones can contain birth and death dates – and also, in some cases, photographs.

Photographs are yet another potential source of a family's historical materials. The careful study of photographs reveals much, such as a family's activities and its economic situation. On a simpler note, they also show us what someone looked like – which again takes us back to a factor such as the family's economic and social situation. For example, do the clothes suggest prosperity – or something else? There is also an emotional quality to the photographs. Are certain family members typically close to one another – or as far away as possible?

While all of the above can tell us much about our family, it is also necessary – if we can – to undertake what historians call oral history. This brings us to yet another way to collect historical information about the family we are researching.

The Oral Interview

A successful interview begins with preliminary preparation. I suggest devising an outline of what the main areas of interest are that will be pursued in the interview. But be careful not to write out questions – this could produce a rigidity that actually gets in the way of discovering the very family history you are seeking. Be prepared to initiate a discussion that will most likely take unexpected twists and turns – those twists and turns are very likely to yield a rich historical discovery!

Attempting to take notes during the interview will most probably prove to be a distraction. Instead, plan on recording the interview. But in order to create a relaxed atmosphere that will produce much historical fruit, place the recording device in an area that will not distract the interviewee – but only after obtaining the consent of the interviewee that a recording of the conversation is permissible.

It is best not to jump right into the interview. After turning on the recording device, try to spend a few minutes simply visiting with the interviewee and talking informally about some unrelated matters. That will then ease both of you into the actual historical interview. Once the interview starts, pay attention to your time – but in a manner that won't make the interviewee uncomfortable.

The interview itself is about the interviewee – not the interviewer. It is easy to fall into the trap of doing too much of the talking as the interviewer. Let the person being interviewed dominate the conversation. Gently prod the interviewee with questions designed to elicit useful responses. You do not want simply yes/no answers in most cases.

Your questions should be concise and clear. Avoid the trap of asking too many questions at once. Go methodically, one succinct question at a time. Avoid interruptions – let a good story develop. But also be aware that there may be a moment to carefully – and gently – pull the interviewee back to the purpose of the interview.

It is also better to do one interview at a time – group interviews will not generally work as well.

The framework of the interview is similar to the framework for researching written documents and material culture. Specific questions you are asking can be grouped as follows.

The details of your family:
There are innumerable possibilities. Some obvious possibilities are questions about how parents or grandparents met. What was their courtship like? Did couples separate, and for what reasons? Were children born at home or in hospitals? When were children seen as adults? Are there famous – or infamous – members of this family? How did family members view aging? Who inherited what?

Other possibilities here include such variables as chronic illnesses, or even similarities in appearance. Were physicians consulted? Or instead, did the family rely upon folk medicine?

Questions regarding geography and the use of physical space:
Here too there are many potential questions, some of which are addressed here. Who first migrated to Genesee County? Who first migrated to the United States? Where have family members resided? Why have people moved? What have residences looked like? Did non-family members reside in these residences? Were the residences made up of nuclear – or extended – families? When did families first acquire technologies such as automobiles, telephones, refrigerators – or ice boxes?

Economic realities:
As you can guess, there are many areas to be explored here. Some of these include such basic questions as work – what did family members do to make a living? Did family members help each other to find work? What was the attitude toward women working outside of the home? Did the family have union members? How often did people change jobs? How did families handle financial matters? How did families cope with economic downturns? How did the family view ambition?

Religious practice and views on social issues:

Did family members become involved in religious and civic organizations? How did the family view people of different religions – or no religion at all? How were friendships maintained? How did people view issues such as race or social class? Did religious practice and involvement in civic organizations include holidays and celebrations? Were alcoholic beverages part of these celebrations, and did this cause friction?

Education:
Was formal education important? Were there different expectations for girls and boys? What levels of formal education were attained? Was there an emphasis on apprenticeships? How did people educate themselves outside of a school setting? How did the family define "success?"

Political attitudes:
What did family members think of different political leaders? What did they think of different political parties? Were any family members political activists? If so, for what causes?

Military service:
Who served in the military? When did they serve? How did members of the family view military service? Did people work in defense plants? Were there people opposed to military service? Who used veterans' benefits, and how did it affect the family? Did views of the military and American foreign policy change throughout time?

Some Final Thoughts on Writing Your Family History

It is advisable to ask others to read what you have written. It is not always easy for the person writing the family history to see where they may have engaged in generalizations not really supported by evidence. In addition, others may be able to fill in gaps that the author did not see – or was otherwise unable to fill in. If a friend is reading your family history, ask them to be critical – that is the only way it will be the best possible family history that you are capable of writing.

Guard against subjectivity. It is easy – especially when writing about something as personal as one's family history – to lose the objectivity that is critical to producing a history that will prove to be valuable to future generations. As you

are researching, writing, and interviewing try to maintain a detachment that will make it easier to effectively analyze information that is contradictory – or maybe even false. Keep in mind that the memories of those you are interviewing can be selective. This is where your gentle yet firm questioning can unearth what the interviewee would otherwise prefer to forget. Therefore, try to acquire more than one interpretation of a particular event.

Ultimately, your obligation is to be as accurate and honest as possible. Knowing that other family members will most likely read what you have written will tend to keep you somewhat restrained – but remember, the typical person will respect straightforwardness if you are perceived as an author striving for accuracy and truth. There is another angle to keep in mind here as well. Never should a family history be understood as an attack or an expose on the family being researched. That not only produces bad history. It also produces unnecessary strife and does nothing to advance the cause of using the past as a means of better understanding one's place in the world in our own day.

Historical Data Table

The following is a suggested format for organizing the basic materials you will encounter when researching or writing about an individual family member. Such material can also be kept in mind when conducting an interview.

Person:
Place and Date of Birth:
Place and Date of Marriage:
Names and Birthdates of the Children of this Marriage:
Spouse, Date, and Place of Previous or Subsequent Marriage:
Children of Previous or Subsequent Marriage:
Education: Dates Place School
- Elementary School
- High School
- College/University
- Graduate/Professional School
- Vocational

Military Service: Dates, Rank, Locations, and the Living Arrangements While the Spouse is on Active Duty or in the Reserves

Employment: Dates, Place, Occupation, Employer
Religion and attendant affiliations:
Union Membership:
Civic Organizations:
Political Organizations:
National, racial, or ethnic identification:
Primary residence locations prior to marriage (include dates if known):
Primary residence locations subsequent to marriage (include dates if known):